

Merchants and Mechanics Banks Building  
56-62 North Water Street  
New Bedford  
Bristol County  
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-683

HABS  
MASS,  
3-NEBED,  
17-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

## MERCHANTS AND MECHANICS BANKS BUILDING

HABS  
MASS,  
3-NEBED,  
17-

Address: 56-62 North Water Street (Water Street, between Hamilton and Rodman Streets), New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts.

Present Owner: New Bedford Fishermen's Union, 62 North Water Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Present Occupants: New Bedford Fishermen's Union, New Bedford Fishermen's Welfare Fund, Seafood Producers' Association, James Lawrence Cotton Company.

Present Use: Office building.

Brief Statement of Significance: A commercial building forming part of the old waterfront district of New Bedford, designed by Russell Warren in the form of a Greek Ionic temple.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: North half built for and owned by the Mechanics Bank; south half built for and owned by the Merchants Bank. In the early 1890's both banks moved out of the building. Zephaniah W. Pease, The Centenary of the Merchants National Bank (New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1925), pp. 27-28, 62, 64. In recent years the building has been owned by the New Bedford Fishermen's Union.
2. Date of erection: Some time between 1831 and 1835. The first record of its occupancy refers to a meeting in it on October 5, 1835 Op. cit., p. 29.
3. Architect, builders: Russell Warren, architect of the whole building. Robert Chase, builder of the north half; Dudley Davenport, builder of the south half. Each owner employed a different builder. Op. cit., p. 28.
4. Original plans, construction: The entasis of the columns on the north half of the portico, and that of the columns on the south half were established by different interpretations of the formula, by their respective builders. Those on the north half were ruled orthodox by the architect; the difference is slight. During construction, a delay of a year or two took place. Pease, p. 28.

5. Notes on alterations and additions: "The interior arrangements of the banks were similar and when one bank, after the lapse of years, installed sumptuous finish and furnishings, the other bank made improvements on a similar scale." [ibid.]. This date was not given, but from the style of the first-floor interiors, it may have been in the late 1860's or 1870's [from observation]. Two storm vestibules were added at an undetermined date.

The second floor appears to have escaped this remodeling; some modern office partitions have been installed, however, at an undetermined date.

One column of the portico was demolished about 1955 by a truck which smashed into the building [interview with owners].

6. Important old views: An undated stereo pair, S. F. Adams, New Bedford, Massachusetts, photographer, is in the possession of the New Bedford Free Public Library, showing the bank signs in place; it was taken before 1890, therefore. Then all eight columns were in place, there were no storm vestibules, there was a small brick chimney near the front on each side, and there was a flagpole mounted on the apex of the pediment. The view is entitled: "Foot of William Street, Old Bank Building."

- B. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Unclassified papers in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford, Massachusetts, might contain some information.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: A monumental commercial building, in temple form, with much Greek Revival detail remaining on the exterior and second story. Russell Warren, architect.
2. Condition of fabric: Sound structurally and generally well maintained as to finish; some exterior woodwork is deteriorating.

### B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 72' frontage by 87' depth. The facade faces west. Two stories.

2. Foundations: Granite ashlar, dressed finish.
3. Wall construction: The facade is of smooth granite ashlar. The other walls are brick, rather small and hard (typical of early nineteenth century New Bedford work). The pediment gable is of wood, with flush board siding. A brick partition wall, running east and west, divides the building into two equal parts, up to the ridge of the roof. There is also a transverse brick partition, with gable, extending to the roof, approximately 33' from the rear wall.
4. Porches: On the west facade is a monumental portico, originally of eight wooden Greek Ionic columns, with capitals resembling those of the Erechtheion. One column is now missing. The floor is paved with sandstone and granite; granite steps extend the length of the portico.
5. Chimneys: One brick chimney is now visible, above the cornice, on the south wall near the west front; an old photograph shows a similar one on the north wall, formerly. One brick chimney on the east end.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Two main entrances on front, at the corners, serving the first floor, and two at the center of the front serving stairways to the second floor. Simple masonry openings; doors appear to be replacements.
- b. Windows, shutters: Simple masonry openings, with granite lintels and sills. Double hung sash, three lights over six lights on second floor; old photograph shows six lights over six lights on first floor--present sash are replacements.

There are no shutters in place now, but remains found in attic appear to be: (1) exterior paneled shutters, (2) exterior louvred shutters, (3) interior shutters.

- c. Storm vestibules were added at the two front corners at an undetermined date. In style they are consistent with the other exterior details.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof of low pitch; the surface cannot be seen clearly from the ground.

- b. Cornice: The entablature of the portico--Greek Ionic--carries along the sides of the building about 52' as a building cornice. The remaining rear portion has the upper third of the entablature as cornice. This is of wood, deteriorating in some places.
- c. Construction: Trusses are spaced about 14' on centers; two occur between front wall and transverse partition. Principal rafters and tie-beams are 9 1/2" x 12" in section, bearing on plate of outside wall and on central brick partition wall. A 9" x 13" vertical post or strut connects them at about mid-span. There is a 7 1/2" x 7 1/2" brace from the strut to the partition, the lower end joined to the tie-beam with an iron strap and bolts. There are two purlins, 8 1/2" x 8 1/2". Roof rafters are 3" x 5", 30" on centers, covered by wide sheathing boards.

Between the rear wall and the transverse wall, the purlins span the whole distance, with the aid of knee braces.

#### C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: First floor: The building is divided into halves down the middle; each side apparently consisted of two rooms, a larger one in front and a somewhat smaller one behind. Alterations at an undetermined date, perhaps c. 1870, substituted a wooden screen for the original dividing element.

Second floor: Each half has a straight enclosed stairway leading from the front door to an interior hall. There is a two-room suite in the front portion, and a single-room in the rear.

Basement: Across the rear thirty feet of the building is a store or office area; it is above grade due to the slope of the street, down toward the east.

2. Flooring: 6 3/4" boards appear in a second floor closet; other areas are covered with linoleum. First floors are of ceramic tile, apparently of the late nineteenth century.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster. Wood lathing of the second floor ceiling is visible, on 3" x 12" joists, 26" on centers.

4. Doorways and doors: Some original doors remain on the second floor; they have six panels, with mouldings, a horizontal one across the top, two vertical panels, a horizontal panel, and two nearly square at the bottom.
5. Trim: Original door and window trim on the second floor is of wood, wide, corner blocks ornamented with acanthus leaves. A wide baseboard with mouldings appears typical. Front rooms have a cornice, apparently plaster. All original trim on the first floor appears to have been replaced.
6. Hardware: An iron or steel door, about 1/2" thick, with rivet heads, serves as a fire-safety door at an opening between the two halves of the second floor. A somewhat similar small double door to a safe is located in the middle office on the north side.

In the second floor hall on the south side is a cast-iron helical stair to the attic.

The date of these features is not determined.

Second floor doors have mortice locks, and are hung with butts.

#### D. Site

This building fills its site, to the sidewalk; it adjoins a two-story brick building to the east. Streets in this old waterfront business district are narrow. The west front is located almost on center with William Street, and forms an imposing terminal feature to vistas along that street.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect  
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